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Space Shuttle Launching Set As Secret Countdown Begins

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CAPE CANAVERAL, Fla., Oct. 1 — The countdown began today for the maiden voyage of the space shuttle Atlantis on a secret military mission. The exact time the countdown began was not disclosed.

The large digital countdown clock at the Kennedy Space Center was darkened, but space agency officials said preparations were under way for the launching, scheduled for Thursday.

Officials of the Pentagon and the National Aeronautics and Space Administration said only that the launching was scheduled for sometime between 10:20 A.M. and 1:20 P.M. Thursday.

The darkened clock and vagueness of the announced liftoff time are part of the Defense Department's efforts to "deny our adversaries" information about the identity and mission of the payload, as Brig. Gen. Richard Abel, chief spokesman of the Air Force, has said.

The thundering liftoff from the Kennedy Space Center is impossible to hide, but it will be more difficult for Soviet tracking facilities to follow the shuttle mission and identify its goals without advance knowledge of the

exact launching time.

Critics of the policy of secrecy, such as the Federation of American Scientists, a nonprofit group based in Washington, contend that only the American public is being kept in the dark. To make their point, they have combed unclassified but obscure public records and asserted that a main goal of the Atlantis mission was to place two military communication satellites in orbit.

The Pentagon's secrecy policy was established in January for the nation's first shuttle flight dedicated to a military mission.

The Atlantis, the fourth and final shuttle, joins the Columbia, the Challenger and the Discovery in the nation's fleet. The flight is the 21st mission of the space shuttle program.

The commander of the Atlantis, Col. Karol J. Bobko of the Air Force, is flying his third space shuttle mission. The pilot is Lieut. Col. Ronald J. Grabe of the Air Force. Other crew members are Maj. David C. Hilmers of the Marine Corps; Lieut. Col. Robert C. Stewart of the Army, the only other space veteran, and Maj. William A. Pailles of the Air Force.